

YOUR ENGLISH, OUR ENGLISH: ENGLISH IN BLACK SOUTH AFRICA

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the late 50's Mario Pei estimated that there were about 250 000 000 native speakers of English in the world.¹⁾ In 1983 Robert E. Shafer put the figure at about 300 000 000.²⁾ If foreign and second language speakers from different parts of the world were to be added, the figure would be much higher; perhaps even higher than of those who speak Mandarin Chinese. (Pei and Shafer agree that there are more native speakers of English on the globe than any other language except Mandarin Chinese, but evidently their estimated figures do not include those for whom English is a second or a foreign language.

The fact that English is the most widely spoken language in the world makes for variations that, quite understandably, differ from the British (educated) model. These variations occur mainly in oral English; written English tends to be more or less 'standard.' In South Africa, for example, we speak of a serious deterioration in proficiency in spoken English,³⁾ but I don't think the same argument holds as firmly for written English. Any representative sample from Black writing will attest to this (see for example the contributions to *Staffrider*).

What seems to be a bone of contention in South Africa is that English among Black South Africans *in general* is on the decline when compared with the past, thereby raising fears that the future may well see a further deterioration. It is about these fears that I wish to write.

2. THE PAST, THE PRESENT, THE FUTURE

The following three extended extracts summarise the past, the present and the future of English among Black South Africans:

Prof. L.W. Lanham wrote as follows in the mid-60's:

In the 1920's and the early 1930's when the African school-going population was approximately one third of what it is now, an African school-child proceeding to high school stood at least a fair chance of receiving instruction from a mother-tongue speaker of English. Since that time, however, following social and political trends in this country and because of the vast increase in school-going population, the chances of such contact have been reduced virtually to nil.³⁾

Lanham observed further that there was a rapid decline in standards of English which was relative to age. The older generation achieved a near mother tongue proficiency in English while the younger generation tended to deteriorate.⁴⁾

Dr K.B. Hartshorne summarised some of the reasons for this decline as follows:

... the limitations of the teachers lead to much formal teaching about language and to the development of much that is non-standard both in speech and usage. It must be remembered that English at this stage is always taught by Bantu teachers, whose qualifications are limited to, at most, a standard VIII education plus a professional training of two years. One out of six primary school teachers is still unqualified and unfortunately too many of these teachers are to be found in the lowest classes where the foundations of language are laid.⁵⁾

Both Lanham and Hartshorne seem to ascribe the deterioration partly to the decrease or absence of mother tongue English teachers at school level. In 1983 Robert E. Shafer (a visiting Professor from Arizona State University in America) quoted Lanham in the same vein -

... the great majority (of Blacks) today are the product of circumstances and a system which have eliminated English as a model for Black learners⁶⁾-

and concluded that Black education, especially the teaching of English in South Africa 'is facing serious problems'.

Lanham's concern about the future of English in Black South Africa

and on the continent of Africa is particularly significant for the point we wish to make later in this article.

He writes:

English in Africa today is in the paradoxical situation of being in ever increasing demand both as an 'official' and a second language at a time when the deterioration of spoken English is progressing at a rate that seriously threatens its effectiveness as a world language on this continent. The cumulative efforts of unchecked mother-tongue interference have produced unique forms of aberrant English in most of the major linguistic areas of Africa south of the Sahara. Following present trends, spoken English may, for the majority of Africans, be reduced to little more than a local patois which other English speakers will have to learn, including those from other major linguistic areas in Africa.⁷⁾

3. YOUR ENGLISH, OUR ENGLISH

The concept of English as a mother tongue (your English) and English as an international language (our English) is well-known and on the whole well-received by both EL1 and EL2 speakers. The critical factor between these two models is mutual intelligibility at both the phonological and syntactic levels.

Although the standard of English among Black South Africans may show a decline in recent years, one cannot but feel that our English, both spoken and written, has kept closer to your English than many other Englishes spoken elsewhere in the world.

My sojourns abroad have brought me into contact with a variety of Englishes that seem to be farther away from your English than the Black South African's English. Although our English borrows discreetly from our vernacular environment, the resultant variety (especially in terms of syntax and idiom) appears more like your English with an extra touch - a touch to draw a smile rather than a sneer. Consider the following examples from Ezekiel Mphahlele's *Down Second Avenue*⁸⁾:

- 3.1 'I'll go drink skokiaan for you!' (p. 24). (If I wish to tell you a piece of my mind a glass or two often helps loosen my tongue - drops inhibitions.)
- 3.2 'A crashing clap sent my mother down on her knees'. (p. 25) 'Like the one that gave me a hot clap at the market this morning?' (p. 49)
- 3.3 'I got it from a goat by the roadside, and you did too if someone asks you. But really Dora whispered it in my ear.' (pp. 29-30)

- 3.4 "'She's there!'" When Africans say a person "is there", they mean you cannot but feel she is alive; she allows you no room to forget she was born and is alive in flesh and spirit.' (p. 59)
- 3.5 (She) 'kept a rough twig between the husband's buttocks long enough to drive him mad and out of the house.' (p. 61)
- 3.6 'If my child dies someone will eat her mother. Damn it, these witches make you feel hot between the thighs.' (p. 79)

Although these extracts are distinctly our English, the meanings *in context* are clear enough to be intelligible for a speaker of your English. Not so with varieties from elsewhere. Consider the following examples from Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*⁹):

- 3.7 'Na him make I no de want carry you book people ... Too too know na him de worry una. Why you put your nose for matter way no concern you? Now that policeman go charge me like ten shillings.' (p. 39)
- 3.8 'Wetting I been de eat all afternoon? ... I no fit understand this kind sleep. Na true say I no sleep last night, but that no be first time I been do um.' (p. 41)
- 3.9 'Ah no, Oga, Master. E no be like dat I beg. I go pay end of mont prompt.' (p. 88)

Further examples from John O'Grady's *No Kava for Johnny*¹⁰ (Samoan English):

- 3.10 'She said, "Sir, soon there is coming from me a child."
"Was there no moon, girl?"
"Yes, sir. There was no moon."
"You are foolish as well as stupid. When there is no moon, it is wise to remain in the fale."'

From Malay, quoted by Gerry Abbott¹¹):

- 3.11 'He send his wife home, lah.' (He's taking his wife home.)
3.12 'Yes' (meaning no).

From the examples given it seems clear that Black South African English, though sometimes different in syntax and idiom from your English, is not moving towards the type of pidgination similar to those exemplified above by Achebe (Nigeria), O'Grady (Samoa) and Abbott (for Malay). Our English seems to have kept very close to the structure, form and idiom of your English. Indeed even the spoken English does not seem to have drifted too far away from your model, problems notwithstanding. To some extent, therefore, Prof. Lanham's observation that the Black South African English

may be 'reduced to little more than a local patois which other English will have to learn'¹²) mercifully seems to apply elsewhere (in a form of pidgin) but not in Black South Africa. Fanagalo, Chelapalapa/Selaphalapha and Tsotsi-taal are horses of a different colour and do not really have a significant bearing on our English. These pidgins can only have a restricted application and are not likely to influence Black South African English. Shafer's observation,

That such a development (i.e. pidgination) may ultimately cause a threat to the teaching of both the country's official languages may well be possible¹³)

is also mercifully highly unlikely. Indeed, the surest way of engendering resentment (even violent reaction) from Black school-going children or young 'educated' Blacks generally is to communicate in Fanagalo or Selaphalapha. In Black South Africa generally, efforts are made to bring our English as close as possible to your English. Trying to out-English the English in English (that affected, unnatural tone) is resented though. I recall an instance when young Blacks resented, too, the term 'English as a second language'! Why second language? Why not just plain English, they ask. I quickly switched to 'English for speakers of other languages' alternating it with 'English as an additional language.'

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHING

I think one should question the value of comparing performance in English (i.e. your English against our English) of the 20's and the 30's with the position today. In the 20's and the 30's the number of Black learners who managed to reach high school and college or university was so small that *intensive instruction* and *individual attention* were possible. A combination of these two is sure to produce good results. Even then, only the very best managed to go beyond primary school. In addition, the fact that highly trained missionary teachers and other equally motivated and qualified expatriate English speaking teachers could man the few high schools and colleges, made for *good* performance as a matter of course. Today the situation is different. The production of teachers trained to a certain level of proficiency cannot keep pace with the growth of the school population. This situation will most likely continue until Black South Africa reaches a level of literacy that will make it possible to balance teacher production with the growth of the school population.

It is ironic that in South Africa, whose very existence and survival depend on the ability of its Black majority to communicate in a second language, English (like Afrikaans) does not seem to

have kept pace with developments in second language teaching strategies. Post-graduate programmes in TESL have just begun, and masters and doctoral degrees in the field similar to those offered overseas are yet to find root. In addition, available literature (including my personal contribution) and research seem to focus on identifying errors, accounting for them and making some general recommendations that in most cases cannot be fully implemented by those for whom they are intended.

Startling as this might sound, what is needed at the moment is not a teaching corps of mother tongue English teachers but rather teaching strategies and material **(both basic and back-up) geared towards teaching larger classes and to be utilised by non-native teachers of English.* This is a realistic approach to a real problem. Very little will be achieved by looking back at the good old days which, alas, will never return.

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3. L.W. Lanham, 'Teaching English pronunciation in Southern Africa' in *Language Learning*, Vol. 13 No. 3 & 4, 1963. p. 153
4. *Ibid.*, pp. 153-4
5. K.B. Hartshorne, 'Literature across cultures: English literature in Bantu schools' in *English Studies in Africa*, Vol. 13 No. 1, March 1970. p. 67
6. R.E. Shafer, *op. cit.*, p. 105
7. L.W. Lanham, *op. cit.*, p. 153
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9. Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease.* (London: Heinemann, 1979)
10. John O'Grady, *No Kava for Johnny.* (Sydney: Ure Smith, 1978) p. 14
11. Gerry Abbott, 'Understanding one another's Englishes' in *World Language English*, Vol. 1 No. 1, Oct. 1981. p. 3

*The writer, in conjunction with a British-based ESL materials writer, P S Tregidgo, has prepared samples of such material for Maskew Miller Longman Southern Africa under the title *ADVANCE WITH ENGLISH* for standard 6, 7 and 8.

12. L.W. Lanham, *op. cit.*, p. 153
13. R.E. Shafer, *op. cit.*, p. 110

ADDITIONAL SOURCES

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